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ABSTRACT

Although formal recognition of the educational and economic problems of rural America came with the establishment of federal assistance programs during the 1960s and 1970s, the level of knowledge and expertise has not kept pace with the desire to help. If educators, researchers, and government personnel expect to have any success in dealing with the educational problems of rural America, there are three basic areas of knowledge with which they should become familiar: the heterogeneity of life styles, values, and beliefs of rural America; the consequences of imposing urban middle-class culture on a rural population; and the differences in attitudes toward education among rural subcultures and communities. Research at the family level must be undertaken and the culture of the community understood and considered before any strategies are developed and implemented. Such ethnographic research will face difficulties; getting researchers into rural areas and having them accepted is difficult and requires time. Also, finding researchers with an appropriate background and the necessary inclination is not easy. Educators can assist in reducing the tensions involved by: making a genuine effort to learn about and appreciate the culture and customs of the particular rural setting; taking a long-range view of the need for change in existing conditions; paying attention to the wants and needs of parents and students; and addressing issues according to local customs, if possible. (ER)

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EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA:
THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL VS. THE CULTURE OF THE FAMILY

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I. How Much Do Researchers Really Know About Rural America?

As Edington (1970), in his review of research on disadvantaged rural youth sums up the problem,

> Previous research reviews have tended to overlook the rural student and the characteristics which may be unique to him and his situation. . . . During the last few years, a considerable amount of material was written about rural Americans, but little of it was based upon research (p. 69).

A more recent attempt to describe sources in rural education (ERIC/CRESS, 1975) indicates that this problem still exists: most of the citations, while directly concerned with the problems of rural education, lacked a methodological rigor or broad data base.

Many authors tend to oversimplify the educational problems of children from rural families. "By its very nature, the typical rural community offers few options in terms of either employment or social activities. The paucity of alternatives affects all that people do, think, and plan for. Studies have concluded that a low level of occupational aspirations among rural youth is associated with the dearth of impressions and lack of visible alternatives in the rural community" (The 1967 President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty Report, p. 43). Bloom et al. (1965) assert that children from poor families get little help at home in learning to read or write or speak, do not know what parental stimulation is, and rarely find their parents interested in how well they do. Riessman (1962) claims that parents of disadvantaged children generally want their children to go to school and get an education

but place little value on education for its own sake; instead, they see education as a means of getting a good job and getting along with today's world. McClurkin (1967) states that the attitudes of many rural teachers adopt the prevailing view that rural children cannot learn.

In the foreword to the latest--and probably most definitive--assessment of rural education, Robert Coles says (Sher 1977:xv): "Even as rural children who come to the city get overlooked, misinterpreted, and insulted by various 'authorities' all too sure of themselves, boys and girls in the rural sections of this country have been outrageously victimized by condescension, aloofness, and yes, the ignorance of arrogant bureaucracies."

Although the formal recognition of the educational and economic problems or rural America and the establishment of federal assistance programs to deal with these problems during the 1960s and 1970s represent a major step forward, the level of knowledge and expertise has not kept pace with the desire to help. The temptation to speculate and to overgeneralize about rural America is all too frequent within the literature and all too often indicates misunderstanding or outright ignorance.

If educators, researchers, and government personnel expect to have any success in dealing with the educational problems of rural America, there are three basic areas of knowledge with which they should become personally familiar:

- The heterogeneity of life styles, values, and beliefs in rural America
- The consequences of imposing middle-class cultural values on a rural population
- The differences among subcultures and communities in their attitudes toward education

II. Factors That Constrain Educational Improvement Efforts and Their Implementation

A. The Heterogeneity of Rural America

Rural America is not simply one large homogeneous segment of this country's population. It is a mosaic of subcultures. This is a major fact that must be taken into account before any improvement efforts and subsequent implementation can be undertaken.

A constant factor throughout the characteristic mosaic of rural America is a general resistance to cultural assimilation into mainstream middle-class, Middle America and in a majority of cases to integration racially, ethnically, religiously, regionally, and even demographically. History has taught all groups and subgroups to be wary of "outsiders." This is reflected even today in rural areas in their distrust of government officials and anything that smacks of "city" rather than "country."

Until the heterogeneity of rural America is acknowledged, accepted, and understood and detailed taxonomies of its facets developed and studied, it will be difficult to establish a sound basis for attempts to solve the educational problems of rural America.

There are ethnic, racial, religious, and language and dialect differences. Although there are individual pockets of subpopulations that have internally consistent ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds within themselves--rural Appalachians,

the Amish, the Hutterites, for instance--there is also the other extreme: large rural areas that not only include many subgroups from different ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds but also mixtures of divisions within these elements as well as an overlapping of the elements. Southwestern Pennsylvania is an example of such a mixture of this end of the continuum: there are great numbers of both Catholics and Protestants and many variations of the latter; there are Poles and Italians scattered throughout the original Anglo-Saxon population in addition to families of many other ethnic backgrounds.

Language and dialect differences abound in rural America and are at variance with mainstream communication standards.

There are regional differences. An exemplary solution for the problems of educating Mexican-Americans in the rural Southwest may meet with disaster in replication in an Appalachian community. There is an enormous cultural difference that must be taken into account when dealing with educating rural children in the Deep South and those in New England.

There are socioeconomic differences even within the majority social class, the working/lower class. Although most of rural America can be defined socioeconomically as working class (that element of the lower class that maintains employment stability and that element of the middle class that is blue collar) and lower class (all elements), very little attention is given to the fact that there are many socioeconomic differences and divisions

within that class. Being on welfare is considered a contemptible disgrace by many rural people. Some of the rural population that is classified low income and/or lower class are not impoverished, underfed, and financially deprived. Statistics do not take into consideration the differences in personal priorities, lifestyle, and acceptable standards of living that enable many to maintain a quality of life that they perceive as at least adequate and in many cases good. Reliance on a privy for toilet facilities, for instance, is not necessarily indicative of poverty--a late-model car may be preferred to indoor plumbing.

B. The "Middle-Classing" of America

The "Americanization" process of former centuries--the pressure to replace the culture of origin with the predominating WASP culture of the country at that time--simply has other terminology now: making everyone middle-class, Middle American. Whereas yesterday's immigrant child became American through Americanization while the family remained foreign, today's lower-class rural child is pressured to become urban middle-class while the family remains rural lower class. The rural child is expected to take on urban values and culture through the educational processes. When this shift is imposed, animosity, alienation, and loss of the culture of origin become the price.

Imposing middle-class, Middle-American values concerning education and attitudes toward it on "alien" cultures is not limited to ethnic minorities. The thrust is upon the entire lower-class popu-

lation which includes those whose "alien" ethnic backgrounds are not given full consideration. White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock abounds within lower-class rural schools. No one gives the children from this subpopulation any special attention or their problems any special recognition. What is overlooked is that their culture is very different from middle-class urban/suburban America.

"In the United States it is generally assumed that every citizen, regardless of his personal values or ethnic membership, must be educated to the limit, that democracy will prevail when education is made available to all, and that the national goals should become the personal goals of everyone. Education is believed to be important not only for national life but also for personal fulfillment and a wide range of social and economic goals" (Hostetler 1974:119). Spindler is in accord with this observation saying " . . . in North American society education is considered desirable for the national society as a whole" (1974:65).

In the landmark 1954-55 Brown v. the Board of Education desegration decision, the Court said, "Today schooling is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment." But what if the parents don't want middle-class cultural values or don't value preparation for professional training? And are these two elements going to insure normal adjustment to the child's environment--if the environment includes different cultural values regarding education? The decision clearly shows taken-for-granted assumptions for the entire country and for every

subpopulation within it.

C. Differences in Attitudes Toward Education Among Rural Subgroups

"Educators who work with parents and children from the culture of poverty are often confronted with problems associated with the value system of the parents, the attitudes of parents associated with these values, the value systems of schools and the success of the children within these value systems. . . . Differences in the development of the intellectual functioning of children have been found not only associated with socioeconomic status but also with the culture of the parents" (Karnes and Zehrback 1975:44-45). Parental reaction to this stance includes resistance to efforts to remediation through changing cultural differences. They resented the insinuations that their value systems were not right.

There have been many references to the differences in values and culture between middle-class and lower-class ethnic groups, but hardly anyone examines the differences in values and culture among lower-class ethnic groups. Tyack is one of the few who deal with this problem: "It is essential . . . to examine differences in attitudes toward education and in achievement levels between ethnic groups, for 'immigrants' varied enormously among themselves" (1976:242). Tyack also found that poverty in itself did not preclude educational success. The explanation could usually be traced to different attitudes toward education among the various ethnic groups.

The Amish resist "educational improvement" because it contradicts their strong beliefs about limiting formal schooling to the "basics" and progressing no further than the eighth grade. However, their

children, even in an alien school environment, fare better than their fellow non-Amish rural students (Hostetler 1971). The Amish, with their Germainc background, greatly value academic education and thus schooling--it is simply a matter of how much and for how long.

On the other hand, Lanz in his ethnography about a rural setting in a coal-mining state says there is "a general anti-intellectualism orientation which is pervasive" (1971:262). The immigrants in the area valued thrift, ambition, hard work, etc., which was in opposition to the native WASP cultural values.

If we examine attitudes toward education among other cultural pockets in rural America--for instance, the Scandanavians, the Mexican-Americans, the Indians--we will undoubtedly find great differences in values concerning education.

There is a tremendous need to acknowledge the differences in attitudes toward education and the school among the various cultures and subgroups in rural America and to find out what educational goals the parents are considering for their children.

III. "The Mismatch of the Culture of the School and the Culture of the Community"

Tyack summarizes educational problems as "The mismatch in the culture of the school and the culture of the community" (1975:282). This problem arises when those in charge of educating the children are from one group whose culture and values concerning education are at variance with the culture and values of the ones to be educated who are from another or other groups: the epitome of the major problem in rural education.

If the local school authorities are considered outsiders not to be trusted, alienation replaces present or potential allegiance. Alienation is usually the

result of an imposition on families by the educational system, something that conflicts with the culture of the community and its school.

Consolidation of schools that results in closing the community school is one example of such an imposition that constitutes a major constraint on educational improvement efforts. Compounding this problem can be the lack of the district's knowledge of this basic conflict between the culture of the school system--with its urban school model and middle-class values--and the culture of the community and its families.

Here is a specific example of this mismatch in the rural South. One of the district directors, even with many years of experience in that district, is totally unaware of the cultural differences of the population in a rural town served by the district. He cannot comprehend or relate to their extreme unhappiness over the loss of their community school through consolidation. He was raised in the South, but in an Appalachian area, and he comes from a professional family. Even though he is a Southerner himself and from a rural area, there is a subtle regional difference and a gross socioeconomic one. His academic career and educational credentials have not exposed him to the importance of these cultural differences in values, nor has his own personal experience provided him with any real-world regional/socioeconomic multiculturalism. An innovative instructional system recommended through a needs assessment study has been implemented throughout the district schools. The families from the rural town are adamantly opposed to the new system and are fighting against it. The underlying animosity--and not the particular educational methodology itself--is producing the alienation. What chance

of program success and improved education for these children does this "treatment" have under these circumstances?

Let us assert here in strong terms that we are not criticizing the district nor its staff. Very few people would know of and understand these underlying conditions. That is what this paper is all about: research, improvement plans, and implementation must get to the base of the problem which is the cultural impediment. Most educators and researchers are unaware of this difference in values and the adverse impact it has on successfully surmounting the educational problems in rural America.

In the foreword (L. and G. Spindler) to Ward's ethnography of a Southern black rural community, the school is spoken of as a place where the "child's total environment is at variance with the culture of the school" (1971:vii). Once again, we see the disorientation when consolidation (howbeit in the name of integration) occurs and the children are bused to the new school. In describing the "lack of communication between class and home" (p. 90), Ward says "schools show no understanding of the social problems in the [district] or the subculture with which they must cope." Again, "the culture of home and school are in conflict" (p. 91).

On the other hand, there can be rapport between school and community in rural communities. A recent ethnography on an Appalachian community describes much pride in the community and support for the community elementary school (Hicks 1976). The school has "become a symbol of the valley as a community, just as its physical plant has taken on the role of ceremonial center for social and political activities" (p. 73).

"Politics, school employment, and kinship are closely bound together" (p. 71). It is quite clear that where the parents have a part in the school and it is "theirs," there is interest and support. The high school is a county-wide consolidated complex where the valley people feel like outsiders; where the building is not the center of family and community activities; where the people and individual communities are not involved in the politics of the school--all of which negate what their cultural values consider to be what school is for.

IV. A Case Study

The following is a scenario of rural America. It is typical of only some of rural America--not all of it. It is typical of only some rural ethnic, racial, and religious subgroups--not all of them. It is typical of only some regions in rural America--not all of them. It is spoken in a dialect and non-standard English that is typical of only some rural groups--not all of them. It is typical of only some subclasses of the lower/working class composing most of rural America--not all of them.

"Mama, I just can't do this here homework."

"How come, Lena May?"

"It's just too hard."

"What they want you to do, Honey?"

"Well, we gotta find 20 textures."

"'Textures." What's that?"

"It's how things feel, Mama. But I just can't find that many."

"Well, I reckon not. It sounds pretty hard."

"But, Mama, Miss Brown says we gotta get 20 for Science class."

"That's right crazy, if you ask me. How come they don't just teach you all to read and do numbers. That's the onliest thing they really need to do. Crazy spending time on something dumb as that."

"Yes, M'am. I reckon that's right. Ain't no use spendin' any more my time on it."*

Lena May's family has been in one Southern rural area for generations--they are white and Anglo-Saxon Protestant as far back as anyone knows. They are typical of this subgroup in that they say that they value education and even say they want their children to go to college. Statements about educational goals, for instance on a questionnaire, are, however, valueless in understanding their culture: they do nothing to encourage, build toward, or influence their children toward such a goal. They do not even know what is necessary to do these things.

These people, however, are not impoverished or ignorant. Lena May's father is a stably employed blue-collar worker. He could easily afford to send her to a state college, a junior college, or a business school. They have four television sets and two large air-conditioned cars; they own their house "free and clear;" last year they took a vacation trip all the way to California. But they do not have a sink in the bathroom--one of these years they hope to install one just as they finally got around to a bathtub five years ago. There are no rugs or carpets in the house, only "linoleum rugs."

Lena May will not go to college, although her parents do insist she

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* Paraphrased without phonetic representation of the dialectic pronunciation. From field notes, Dillman, 1977.

she will finish high school. However, she is "going steady" and intends to get married when she graduates (or before if she can talk her parents into letting her quit school). With three years to go, will she make it or will she become yet another drop-out statistic?

The question is, what innovative strategy, curriculum, media would reach Lena May under these circumstances? What new subject, alternative enrichment program would influence the family's attitudes positively and in turn influence Lena May's efforts and aspirations?

V. Implications and Recommendations

The purpose of this paper is not to suggest procedures, ideas, strategies for solving the problems of educating the children in rural America nor to outline research techniques to find out what's "right" and "wrong" about the educational systems and implementation methods employed in rural schools. We are simply saying that all these tactics will be useless, have been useless, because the underlying cultural aspects that act as impediments have been and are being ignored.

As is brought out throughout Sher's book (1977), the community, the families, the rural society and values must be understood and considered in any master plan for improving the situation.

We are going further by stressing that research at the family level must be undertaken and the culture of the community understood and taken into account before any strategies are developed and implemented. Admittedly, this is a difficult, time-consuming task that will require in-depth research utilizing case-study, ethnographic research techniques. Inherent in such research are two problems.

First, getting researchers into rural areas and having them accepted is difficult and requires time--and hence, money. Hicks writes that it took six months before his position in the Appalachian community he was studying became established. He was thought at various times to be an "FBI man," a psychiatrist, a tourist, a teacher--all negative connotations of being a "furriner" (Hicks 1976).

Second, finding researchers with an appropriate background for such work and the necessary inclination is not easy. A native who has gone urban/professional may not have the required detachment for anthropological work in his/her place of origin. On the other hand, professional credentials do not guarantee a range of personal exposure to and involvement with the population under study, a background needed for some commonality necessary for acceptance and trust by the community and/or for an attitude that is at least neutral if not empathetically interested.

Though difficult, it is not an impossible task. We feel it is imperative to have this basic researched foundation of knowledge to promote understanding among school authorities, help-agents, and researchers that will help in formulating strategies and prescribing curriculum, methods, and materials.

In such work, for instance, it will be discovered that the parents of Lena May want to support a local school and want her to complete high school. But nothing will change their value orientation to include active encouragement toward education beyond high school, to raise aspiration levels beyond early marriage (or in the case of a son, simple job stability), or to promote anything that would take her (or him) away from family and local community. This is a relatively happy family, quite content with home, family, and community status. Promises of what higher education and status beyond that of working class can bring are meaningless and unwanted--at least in the immediate future. (Perhaps gradual steps up that are accepted would build for future generations.)

If Lena May's parents will support the teaching of the basics, what can we do to guarantee this simple process that will ensure literacy for all the Lena Mays instead of trying to offer a smorgasbord of sophisticated courses that parent and children at best merely tolerate? Wouldn't it be better to be successful at reducing illiteracy rates and fail at promoting college education and half-learned, never-to-be-used courses than to alienate as well as fail at implementing an urban/suburban education?

Why not find out what matches this family's culture as well as other cultures in rural America and individualize curricula to match each culture?

VI. Summary

Through such in-depth research of this descriptive, ethnographic nature, much can be learned about the cultural impact of rural America

on educational outcomes of their children and also the vast differences in cultural attitudes and values that exist among the various subgroups. This is an imperative necessity before improvement within the educational strategies of the school system can be successfully implemented for this group. Such first-step basic research will pave the way for greatly needed help in overcoming the extreme deficiencies in educating rural America.

Each approach and strategy for solving the problems have their own assumptions and key behaviors. Where conditions are favorable to a given approach, it may work; but this does not mean that implementation in another setting will be successful. Also certain interaction approaches, e.g., those that emphasize parental inputs to direct policy, tend to work more effectively in rural settings than do other approaches.

Great numbers of the poor and disadvantaged are to be found in rural areas. The focus of most educational research and implementation has been in urban/suburban settings. Very little activity in research areas has been directed to the rural population. Most of the scattered attempts to improve rural schools have been based on models derived from urban/suburban education models even though rural schools and communities differ in important respects from urban ones. The complex diversity of cultures and subgroups within this population is rarely ever considered as an underlying problem to implementation of solutions to meet the educational needs.

School officials are all too often unaware of such differences in attitudes toward education between themselves and the families in the

communities and areas they serve. Since so few educators have the cultural background of the majority population of rural American, the problem is especially acute in educating rural children. By bringing the problems to the attention of educators and policymakers, it is hoped that a better understanding of the peoples of rural America will help in dealing in a constructive manner with the education of rural children.

Then there is always the remaining ethical problem of "disturbing the culture." Perhaps there is a middle-of-the-road approach that will benefit the children without destroying the family ties that are bound by the culture.

The conflict inherent in a desire to help and a determination to intrude is likely to remain a continuing problem in rural education, and it has no simple solutions. However, there are some ways we can, as educators, do our part to reduce the tensions involved:

- Make a genuine effort to learn about and appreciate the culture and customs of our particular rural settings
- Take a long-range view of the need for change in existing conditions, both by seriously evaluating the benefits of change and by implementing them in small, incremental steps where possible
- Pay attention to the wants and needs of both parents and students, especially where the wants and needs, according to our standards, contradict each other because of cultural beliefs
- Address issues according to local customs if possible, and where not possible, be especially cautious about employing new or potentially threatening methods.

These are difficult tasks to accomplish, and they are not made any easier by the rapid changes in our society and the reactions of rural Americans to those changes. As educators, we must constantly remember that in the situation described here we are the enemy.

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